DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 060 711 FL 002 962

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TITLE Aspect in the Latin Verb.
INSTITUTION Pacific Northwest Conference on Foreign Languages, Portland, Oreg.
PUB DATE 72
NOTE 5p.; In "Proceedings of the Pacific Northwest Conference on Foreign Languages," Twenty-second Annual Meeting, Boise, Idaho, April 16-17, 1971, p197-201

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Classical Languages; *Grammar; *Latin; *Morphology (Languages); Syntax; *Traditional Grammar; *Verbs

ABSTRACT

A charge is made that the traditional classification of the Latin verb system into six tenses in the indicative mood (present, future, future perfect, imperfect, perfect, and pluperfect) is incorrect since it unduly stresses application of the term "tense." Ensuing discussion centers around grammatical aspect as signaled by the form of a verb rather than by its content. The author then considers a second variety of aspect--lexical aspect--which is dependent upon the semantic load of a verb. Concluding remarks focus on means by which distinctions between "perfect" and "imperfect" can be made more evident. (RL)

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ASPECT IN THE LATIN VERB

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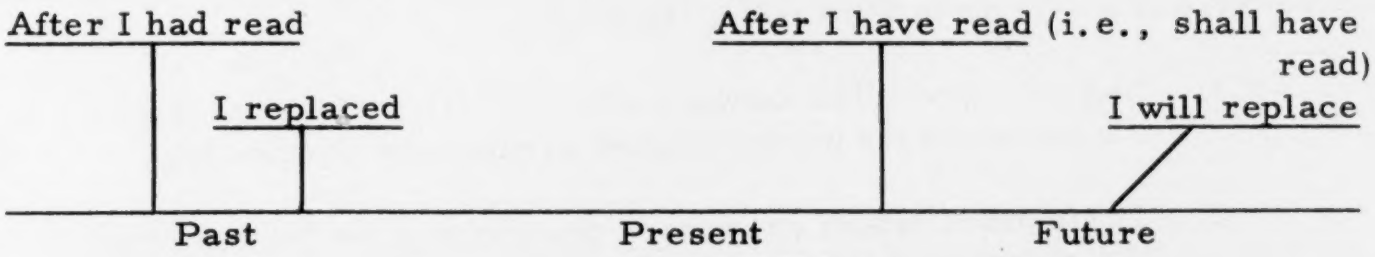
Traditionally, treatments of the Latin verb system have included the observation that there are six tenses in the Indicative Mood: Present, Future, Future Perfect, Imperfect, Perfect, and Pluperfect. Such an assertion, however, is erroneous because of the misapplication, in this instance over-application, of the term "tense." "Tense" obviously derives ultimately from the Latin tempus and serves, in grammatical usage, to indicate the location in time of the activity expressed by a given verb form.

In the order of reality, we generally conceive of three basic categories of time: present, past, and future, which may be graphically represented as:

Past Present Future

In addition, there may be, depending upon the particular situation, categories of relative time. Any temporal observation is, of course, relative in the sense that a relationship is expressed or implied in terms of a given present moment. But a temporal relationship may also be expressed between two past moments or between two future moments, as in the English utterances: After I had read the book, I replaced it on the shelf; and, After I have read the book, I will replace it on the shelf. The actions of these two utterances may be charted as follows:



Thus, with regard to the Latin Indicative, the Present and the Future may validly be labeled tenses since they correspond to basic components of any temporal scheme. The Pluperfect and the Future Perfect may also be referred to as tenses since they indicate relative moments in the

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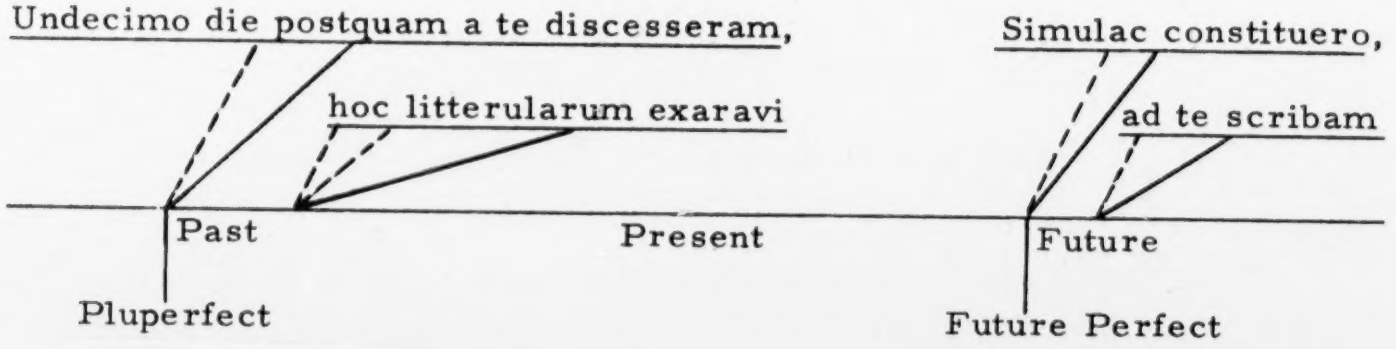
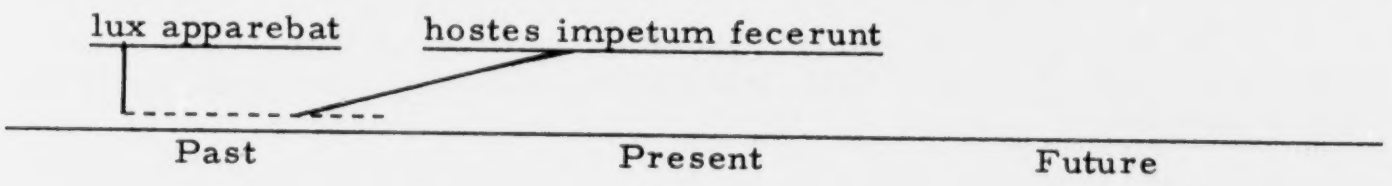
past and in the future. The Pluperfect expresses an activity as occurring in the past at a time previous to that of another activity occurring in the past. The Future Perfect expresses an action that will have taken place before another future action occurs:



The Imperfect and the Perfect, however, may not validly be called tenses. Both express past time activity, but the activity of a verb in the Imperfect and that of one in the Perfect may occur at the same moment. The statement Iamque lux apparebat cum hostes impetum fecerunt may be rendered graphically:



Since the term "tense" indicates a distinction based on location in time and since the Imperfect and the Perfect may occupy the same location in time, it follows logically that the distinction between the Imperfect and the Perfect may not be explained in terms of tense. Rather, the distinction between the two should be couched in terms of aspect.

The category of aspect is concerned with the shading of a verb form. It refers to the manner in which the activity of a verb is viewed by the speaker (or writer), e.g., with regard to its completion, continuation, or repetition. The philologist Wilhelm Streitberg enumerated five kinds of verbal aspect found in Proto-Indo-European:

1. Imperfective (also known as Durative), which expresses a process in its uninterrupted duration or continuity.

2. Perfective, which expresses the process as viewed from the moment of its completion.

3. Iterative, which denotes an indeterminate number of repetitions of a Perfective or an Imperfective process.

4. Inchoative, which expresses the transition from one state to another within a process.

5. Perfect (not to be confused with Perfective), which designates a process in its accomplished state, i.e., as having been done.[1]

The first and second of the preceding types of aspect found in Latin's parent tongue are most relevant to the matter at hand. With regard to the Latin verb, the question of Imperfective versus Perfective is recognized by everyone but is usually treated in terms of tense rather than aspect, although the terminology utilized (Imperfect and Perfect) accurately reflects aspect. These two so-called "tenses" may accurately be described as two different aspects of a single Past Tense since they do not have to do with location in time (past in both instances) but with the temporal distribution or contour of the activity expressed by whatever verb is under consideration.

The Imperfect, traditionally referred to as the tense of description, expresses Imperfective aspect, i.e., it presents the past activity of a verb as considered in its duration or continuity, giving no definite indication as to whether or not the activity was brought to a close. For example, the sentence Caesar exspectabat novas copias tells us only that Caesar, at some time in the past, was in the process of waiting for reinforcements. Lacking further information, it is impossible to determine if they arrived or not, or if Caesar gave up hope and ceased waiting. All that is known is that Caesar's act of waiting was in progress in past time.

The Latin Perfect, on the other hand, expresses Perfective aspect. It presents an action as of the moment when it was achieved or terminated. The sentence Caesar exspectavit novas copias informs us that Caesar completed his act of waiting, with the implication that the reinforcements did arrive. We then expect the following sentences to indicate that Caesar subsequently set out to attack the enemy. Caesar's act of waiting is here viewed at the moment of its completion. In short, the Perfect expresses Perfective aspect inasmuch as it focuses upon the moment at which an activity ended, whereas the Imperfect expresses Imperfective aspect since it focuses on activity in progress.

A third type of aspect, the aforementioned Iterative, may also be observed in the Latin Imperfect. The Iterative denotes an activity repeated an indeterminate number of times. Thus the statement Caesar bellum gerebat indicates that Caesar used to wage war, that, in effect, he was in the habit of waging war. But the statement does not indicate on how many occasions he did so. If a limit were to be placed on the activity, it would be necessary to use a Perfective verb form along with a complement which would note the frequency of repetition.

Inchoative, the fourth type of aspect is most evident in the Inceptive (or Inchoative) verbs, those ending in the suffix -sco, such as iuvenesco

("to grow young") and calesco ("to grow warm"). In addition, Inchoative aspect may occasionally be observed in the Imperfect, as in Vergil's "iamque arva tenebant ultima" (vi. 477). Here, tenebant indicates that they were just getting to the fields, that they were on the point of arriving.

As for the fifth type of aspect mentioned above, Perfect, it is to be seen in the Latin Past Participle. The Ablative Absolute construction hostibus interfectis designates the accomplished state rather than the point of completion of the activity. In hostes interfecit the emphasis is upon the point at which the action terminated, which is Perfective aspect. But with hostibus interfectis the primary concern is with the action as having already been completed and now considered in a state of completion.

Thus far, the discussion has centered around grammatical aspect--aspect as signaled by the form of a verb rather than by its content. But we may also consider a second variety of aspect: lexical aspect, which is dependent upon the semantic load of a verb. In this respect, all verbs may be divided into two categories: Telic and Atelic (from the Greek τελος signifying "end" or "goal").[2]

Atelic verbs are those which do not have to wait for a goal to be achieved before they can be said to be realized, but are realized as soon as their activity begins. The verb exspectare is an Atelic verb. As soon as one begins to wait, the activity of waiting is realized. No matter how long one waits, he may say afterwards, "Exspectavi."

Telic verbs, on the other hand, are not realized until a goal is achieved. If an individual were dying and if he were to suddenly recover, obviously he would not be able to say afterward, "Mortuus sum," since death was not attained. Therefore, the verb morior is Telic.

If we combine Telic and Atelic verbs with Perfective and Imperfective constructions, we have four possible results:

1. A Telic verb in Imperfective form (Caesar moriebatur) tells us nothing about the attainment or non-attainment of the goal. We learn only that Caesar was once dying; we do not know if he actually died or not.

2. A Telic verb in Perfective form (Caesar mortuus est) informs us that the goal has been attained and the action of the verb realized. Caesar has died.

3. An Atelic verb in Imperfective form (exspectabat) expresses the action in terms of its continuity.

4. An Atelic verb in Perfective form (exspectavit) presents the activity as of its termination.

The matter of aspect in the Latin verb is of more than just academic interest. Considering the Perfect and the Imperfect as aspects of a single tense instead of two separate tenses goes beyond the question of terminology. In addition to the accuracy of a distinction based upon aspect rather than tense, there are extremely practical ramifications in terms of pedagogy. Students of Latin at all levels generally experience difficulty in fully comprehending the contrasting functions of the Perfect and the Imperfect, in large part because the instruction is usually couched in terms of differentiation by tense. However, to discuss the two forms in terms of aspect is to provide the student with another, more precise vantage point on the problem, which should afford a clearer understanding and alleviate in particular the task of composition.

NOTES

1. Wilhelm Streitberg, Urgermanische Grammatik (Heidelberg, 1896).

2. A detailed discussion of lexical aspect and its correlation with grammatical aspect is to be found in Howard Garey, "Aspect in the French Verb," Language, 33 (1957).